

entertainment. Furthermore, many places have already stopped playing the game around ten years ago.

- 3) In urbanised areas, which include the provincial town and capital city, the game is purely a contest of strength and a pure entertainment. Or the game is rarely played.

## 4. *General Description of the Game*

### 4.1. Name of the Game

In Khmer, the game is called *teanh prot*, where *teanh* means ‘to pull’ and *prot* means rope, specifically a type of rope traditionally made of woven strips of hide from buffalos or cows.<sup>11</sup> Thus, *teanh prot* literally means ‘to pull a rope made of woven strips of hide from buffalos or cows’. (Further information about the term *prot* is in the next section below). The suitable rendering in English, however, should be ‘rope pulling’.

### 4.2. When the Game Is Played

The *teanh prot* is a ritual game played in two traditional ceremonial occasions—namely, the New Year and the *chlong chet*. As observed, the game is generally played in the afternoon.

#### 4.2.1. *The New Year*

The Cambodian New Year, like the New Year in Thailand or Laos, is celebrated for three days in mid-April. During the New Year celebrations, the *teanh prot* is played. These days, the game is generally held on the second and the third days of the holiday, although there are no traditional restrictions preventing the game from being played on the first day. Of the holiday celebration days, the third, which is also the last day of game play, is the most important one. In Khmer, this day is called *thngay tras*, which means, ‘the day on which the ceremony ends’, or *thngay phdach prot*, which means, ‘the day on which the rope is cut’. The latter name refers to an important stage of the *teanh prot*. This is when the *prot* is physically or ritually cut (see figure 4,6). Some villagers strongly express their opinion that on the last day, it is essential for the game to be played. The importance of the last day and the cutting of the rope is seen in the expression *phdach prot*, which is a generic expression used to mean the last stage of any game, race, or contest. The symbolic act of cutting the rope is full of socio-religious and cultural meaning. The importance and relevance of these will be described in greater detail in Section 4. For now and in short, let us just say that cutting the rope is a ritual expression to show the passage of time from the old year into a new one.

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<sup>11</sup> Normally three strips are woven together.

#### 4.2.2. *Chlong Chet*

The Khmer term *chlong* means 'to cross over'. *Chet* is the fifth month in the Cambodian lunar calendar; it is the month in which the New Year is celebrated and it is also the last month of the year. Thus *chlong chet* means 'to cross over the month of *chet*', and by extension entering into the new month of the New Year. In other words, it can be taken to mean 'crossing over the old year and entering into the new one'. The expression is synonymous to *chlong chnam*, 'the passage of the year'. The former expression is often heard in the northern parts of Cambodia while the latter can be heard all over the kingdom. Even though the terms are synonymous, *chlong chet* carries with it additional meaning that refers to the ritual performance that takes place shortly after the New Year celebration as a way of marking the start of a new rice cultivation season. It is important to note that there is no fixed date for this ritual performance. Rather a day is chosen annually in each community by agreement. Each community celebrates this ceremony in their own village in a common building that is normally located in the middle of the village by the *neak ta* hut (the hut where the local tutelary spirit is believed to reside). Only after the celebration are the villagers ritually 'permitted' to work in their rice fields (Fig. 5 and 6). The celebration is considered a request to local deities for permission to cultivate rice for protection from natural calamities, such as lightning strikes,<sup>12</sup> and for better crops in the coming year. In this ceremony, villagers sometimes bring small packages of rice seeds to the local deity hut (Fig. 7). Moreover, the rice is seen to have a soul like humans do. To obtain better crops, the rice seeds need to possess a 'complete souls'. *She*<sup>13</sup> needs to be healthy; thus a rite of calling the souls of the rice is also performed (Fig. 8). In many ways, the *chlong chet* is comparable to the royal ploughing ceremony that is celebrated annually by the royal palace to mark the start of the rice cultivation season (Fig. 9). The ceremony normally starts in the afternoon and ends in morning, before noon next day. In the afternoon, the *teanh prot* is played. Importantly, it is during this game that the rope is physically or ritually cut. Symbolically, it marks an end of one rice cultivation cycle and the beginning of a new one.

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<sup>12</sup> Annually, quite a remarkable number of people die because of lightning strikes. Cambodia Daily, a local English Language Newspaper, reported on March 13, 2013 that

Cambodia's high number of 7.8 was the average for deaths in five years as reported by the National Committee for Disaster Management: 165 (2011), 114 (2010), 140 (2009), 95 (2008) and 45 (2007), then divided by the average population over the same years, which was 14.4 million. For 2012, no final death report has been made, although the death count for the first nine months was 100. It is important to stress that these figures are only as good as the reporting, collation, and dissemination thereof.

<sup>13</sup> Rice is personified as a female, called *neang propey*, or Lady *propey*.

### 4.3. Where the Game Is Played

During the New Year, the game is often played in Buddhist monastery compounds. The compounds are the most favourable and convenient locations because they have ample open space for the games and other religious and social activities for the public (Fig. 7).

The game can also be played in an open space of a village (Fig. 8) or just in front of someone's house as long as there is enough space to accommodate the games and other activities (Fig. 9).

During the field study of *chlong chet* in 2013 for this report, the research team discovered that the game can even be played just in front of the *neak ta* hut, which is a sacred place in the village.

### 4.4. Materials for the Rope

The temple committee or the elders of the community are often responsible for providing the rope prior to or during the New Year and/or *chlong chet* celebrations. Although the term *prot* refers to the rope made from the hide of buffalos or cows,<sup>14</sup> the rope used in the game can be woven from vines collected from the nearby forest or stems of sugar palm leaves, or it can even be made of plastic and bought from the market. In Kambor Or, a Buddhist temple in Siem Reap province where the team conducted field research, some villagers were asked by the temple committee to collect vines from the forest, but as of around two o'clock, no suitable vines were brought to the temple. One of the temple committee told the research team that without a rope, the game would not be played. Finally, a rope was bought from the market. Once the store-bought rope was brought to the temple, the game started. During the field research, we did not have a chance to see the vines, only plastic ropes were used (Fig. 13). The rope used in the game ranges between fifteen and fifty metres. If the rope is too small, two or three can be woven together.

### 4.5. The Participants

The *teanh prot* teams can each have ten to fifty people, and the teams are generally divided by gender, with married women on one side and married men on the other. Their ages range from 25 to about 60 years old. There are also games for mixed teams made up of both genders and include members of all ages from 8 to 60 years old.

During the field research study in Chres Village, Spean Thnot Commune, Chikreng District, Siem Reap Province, two teams of women and men, most of them married, were involved in the game (Fig. 14). In Kambor Or Village, there were mixed teams of all ages;

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<sup>14</sup> To the best of the research team's knowledge, ropes made of animal hides are no longer produced, although many people still know or have heard about how to make it.

sometimes even elderly men and women participated in the game. During the *chlong chet* ceremony in the Banteay Srey Buddhist temple, mixed teams of all ages and genders participated (Fig. 15 through 19).

Overseeing the games is one referee, sometimes two. The referees are also elderly volunteers, but sometimes they are selected by the teams (Fig. 20). If there are two referees, normally a man and a woman represent each side (Fig. 21).

#### **4.6. How the Game Is Played**

In the afternoon, a rope is normally brought to the contest area. A dividing line is drawn in the middle of the area or coloured strings are tied to a rope and placed in the middle to mark the centre (Fig. 22). To start the game, each team holds the rope on their respective side of the drawn line. Then, the referee(s) counts from one to three to mark the beginning of the game. Sometimes, the referee shouts *yak* or three times to urge the teams into action, whereas both teams shout *heouy* in return each time they hear *yak* or from the referee. These sounds are shouted to ward off malevolent spirits.

In some areas, for instance at Bakong Temple, the game is accompanied by a music performance (Fig. 23). As observed, there were a drummer and a string instrument player. The drummer played active role in the game. For instance, after the referee cheers or counts to start the game, both teams start pulling the rope and the drum was banged to cheer the teams. The drum continued until one team won the contest. The string instrument is only played for the players and audience to sing and dance (Fig. 24).

A win is declared when one team pulls the other team over the drawn line. At the end of the game, the rope is formerly said to be cut off in the middle by an *Achar*, a Buddhist officiating priest. However, sometimes the rope breaks during game play by the pulling force of the two teams. Since the rope is brought from the market these days and it is costly, the rope isn't actually cut, but symbolically cut as a ritualistic routine. This way the rope can be kept at the temple for the games next year. As mentioned before, the *phdach prot* or 'the cutting of the rope' is one of the most important stages of this ritual game and it holds a significant and symbolic meaning in socio-religious practices. As mentioned in 4.1, the expression *phdach protis* derived from the *teanh prot* game, and it is commonly used to mean the last stage of a game, a race, or contest.

#### **4.7. Bets on the Game**

As observed, there are no obvious verbal wagers set during the game. However, when a team wins the game, the members run over to the losing team and rub their buttocks on bodies of the losing teams (Fig. 25 through 27) as if to wipe off the dirt. This act is known in Khmer as *ket*. Such 'punishment' as a wager relates to the highly significant symbolism in the calling for rain ritual (see Section 4.3 for more information). It should be noted that touching each other especially between opposite genders is not customarily allowed and

is considered inappropriate behaviour. However, during the New Year and the *chlong chet* celebration, this act is acceptable, particularly in the game. Villagers often say, 'If you don't want to play, it is fine, and if you play, you should not be angry!'

## **5. Historical Background of the Teanh Prot**

Section 3 and 4 detailed the current state of the game as it is played in modern Cambodia. However, to truly have an understanding of the significance of the *teanh prot*, it is important to consider the historical background into the development of the game. To trace its origins and the source of inspiration in Cambodian culture, we will look at the only surviving folktale about the *teanh prot* as well as iconographical representations that depict stories about the game.

### **5.1. Folktale Associated with the Teanh Prot**

Mr Moa Mey heard a *teanh prot*-related folktale from a late monk, Venerable Thong. This story, as narrated by Mr Mey, was published in 1953 in a *Kampuch Surya*, a Cambodian journal. It is now considered a very valuable piece of cultural heritage because it is the only textual resource available that is related to the *teanh prot*.<sup>15</sup>

#### **5.1.1. Text Translation**

One day, a horde of demons, who were jealous of the gods, said that the gods did not have much more power than the demons at all and that these gods were held higher positions and levels of esteem because of favours granted by Lord Eisor (Shiva). The demons also said that if the gods were to enter into a contest of strength with the demons, then the gods would surely lose.

Hearing such comments, the gods boastfully said, 'We are not afraid of you, demons, even though you are large. If you would like to have a contest of strength, we agree. We are not afraid at all'.

The demons and gods agreed to have a contest of strength that would be performed by pulling a rope. The terms of the game were that if the demons were to win, then they would hold higher positions than the gods. For instance, when approaching the Lord Eisor in his palace or in any meeting, the demons would sit higher than the gods. The rope-pulling game was scheduled for the following day.

The gods paced in front of Lord Eisor's palace courtyard, thinking of a strategy. Then, Valin (the lord of the monkeys), who heard of the contest, approached the gods with an idea. Valin suggested that the gods use the Naga (mythical multi-headed serpent) as the rope. The gods would hold the head side, and the

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<sup>15</sup> Buddhist Institute, *Kampuch Surya*, (Phnom Penh: Buddhist Institute, 1953), 547-549.